

Theorising the 'deliberative father': compromise, progress and striving to do fatherhood well

Ives, Jonathan

DOI:

[10.1332/204674314X14184029517584](https://doi.org/10.1332/204674314X14184029517584)

License:

Creative Commons: Attribution (CC BY)

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):

Ives, J 2015, 'Theorising the 'deliberative father': compromise, progress and striving to do fatherhood well', *Families, Relationships and Societies*, vol. 4, no. 2, pp. 281-294.
<https://doi.org/10.1332/204674314X14184029517584>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

Publisher Rights Statement:

Eligibility for repository : checked 27/04/2015

General rights

Unless a licence is specified above, all rights (including copyright and moral rights) in this document are retained by the authors and/or the copyright holders. The express permission of the copyright holder must be obtained for any use of this material other than for purposes permitted by law.

- Users may freely distribute the URL that is used to identify this publication.
- Users may download and/or print one copy of the publication from the University of Birmingham research portal for the purpose of private study or non-commercial research.
- User may use extracts from the document in line with the concept of 'fair dealing' under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 (?)
- Users may not further distribute the material nor use it for the purposes of commercial gain.

Where a licence is displayed above, please note the terms and conditions of the licence govern your use of this document.

When citing, please reference the published version.

Take down policy

While the University of Birmingham exercises care and attention in making items available there are rare occasions when an item has been uploaded in error or has been deemed to be commercially or otherwise sensitive.

If you believe that this is the case for this document, please contact UBIRA@lists.bham.ac.uk providing details and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate.

article

Theorising the 'deliberative father': compromise, progress and striving to do fatherhood well

Jonathan Ives, University of Birmingham, UK
j.c.ives@bham.ac.uk

This article presents qualitative data collected during a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council exploring 11 men's experience of first-time fatherhood. It draws specifically on data from interviews conducted after the birth of their child, to present three different ways that men attempt to construct 'fairness' in their fathering practice. It uses this data to begin to theorise the 'deliberative father', which is presented as a morally progressive form of fatherhood that focuses on process rather than practice. Three counter-arguments are considered, with particular attention paid to Reece's (2013) argument against thin conceptions of 'reflective' parenting. The article concludes that deliberative fatherhood is not morally progressive because the process of deliberation ensures morally optimal practice. Rather, it is morally progressive because the process of deliberation makes morally optimal practice possible.

key words fathers • fatherhood • moral progress • compromise • parenting

Background

Contemporary fatherhood is increasingly characterised as a more practically involved and emotionally engaged role than it has been in the past (Dermott and Miller, forthcoming). This shift is not simply observed, but has also been evaluated and endorsed, giving rise to an ethical normativity that, to use Furstenberg's (1988) term, distinguishes between 'good' and 'bad' fathers. This linkage of changes in fatherhood practice to some kind of moral progress contributes to a moral discourse of contemporary parenthood, which, when applied to fatherhood in the United Kingdom (UK), has tended to centre on a moral imperative to create and support the kinds of involved and engaged fathering practices that benefit children (Ives, 2014). The moral discourse of contemporary fatherhood is associated not only with direct fathering practice for the benefit of the child but, as Collier (2010) has noted, also with wider concerns about justice, gender equality and social cohesion. Collier's point is that although parenting practices are putatively focused on the child, there are underlying narratives around the moral legitimacy of those practices that are connected to more general normative debates about the gendered division of labour in the home and the workplace, and the gendered (in)equity that this represents. Given this, contemporary conceptions of the 'good father' seem to encompass more than a commitment to the child, but also a commitment to gender equality and the sharing of labour and resources in a fair, equitable and, above all, justifiable way.

Contemporary fatherhood, then, is associated with ‘progressive’ forms of caring masculinity, which challenge the gendered, and traditionally unequal, dichotomy between work and home, public and private, breadwinning and childcare. It is ostensibly premised on a rejection of the traditional breadwinner model, and an endorsement of a fatherhood focused on achieving ‘intimate engagement in multiple aspects of their child’s life’ (Dermott, and Miller, forthcoming). While the term ‘new’ fatherhood was once used ubiquitously to describe this phenomenon, more recent scholarship has looked for terms that better capture the complex nature of contemporary fatherhood. For example, Dermott (2008) describes ‘intimacy’, characterised by prioritising the formation and maintenance of an emotional bond and child-focused activities. In intimate fatherhood, breadwinning is recognised as a central fatherhood role, but its relative importance is downplayed. Williams (2008), alternatively, theorises the ‘reflexive father’, whose fathering practice is a response to personal circumstance and life history.

This article draws on data collected during a two-year study of men’s transition to fatherhood, and theorises the ‘deliberative father’. Data are presented that demonstrate men’s engagement with, and construction of, fatherhood as a moral activity intimately connected to various constructions of ‘fairness’. I will argue that this is demonstrative of an approach to fatherhood that is more concerned about process (ie, how fatherhood roles are constructed and negotiated) than practice (ie, what fatherhood roles are actually performed), and that this focus on process *ought* to be definitive of morally progressive fatherhood.

Methods

Men were followed over approximately eight to nine months (from the first 12-week scan to eight weeks after the birth of their baby). Regular face-to-face and telephone interviews were held with participants over this time, which explored their experiences of/feelings about becoming a father, and mapped their journey from early pregnancy to early fatherhood.

Participants were recruited through community midwives and hospital maternity units in the West Midlands, UK. Potential participants were provided with an information pack by their midwife (directly or via their partner) at the initial booking appointment, and asked to contact the author if they were interested in taking part. Of the 16 eligible respondents, 11 men were purposively sampled to achieve as wide a range of ethnicity, age, education and employment as possible (see Table 1).

A combination of in-depth face-to-face and telephone interviews was employed, with one interview held approximately once a month (see Figure 1). Telephone interviews were relatively structured, and aimed to elicit information about ongoing routine, or unusual, events that had occurred since the last interview. Face-to-face interviews were semi-structured, with a topic guide comprising a series of standard questions that focused on:

- expectations;
- intentions;
- perceptions of self and others;
- birth;
- normative ideals of fatherhood;

- experience of maternity services;
- difficulties/concerns;
- support/information needs.

The topic guide was also informed by the content of previous telephone interviews, enabling face-to-face interviews to be oriented around issues raised by participants themselves.

Table 1: Participant demographics (self-reported)

Pseudonym	Ethnicity	Age	Relationship to child's mother	Highest educational qualification	Employment status	Current/most recent field of employment
Ben	White British	22	Cohabiting	A-level	Employed	Customer service
Brian	White British	44	Married	NVQ	Self-employed	Mortgage advice
Charles	White British	40	Married	Degree	Self-employed	E-commerce
Daniel	White British	31	Married	Degree	Employed	Civil service
James	White British	29	Married	Degree	Employed	Project management
Janesh	British Asian	27	Married	Vocational degree	Employed	Dentistry
Michael	White British	22	Cohabiting	NVQ	Employed	Marketing
Peter	White British	58	Married	O-level	Retired	Haulage
Phil	White British	35	Married	HND	Employed	Information technology
Sandeep	Indian	31	Married	Vocational degree	Employed	Optometry
Simon	Black Caribbean	35	Married	Degree	Employed	Public relations account management

Note: HND = Higher National Diploma; NVQ = National Vocational Qualification.

Ongoing and concurrent data collection and coding facilitated an iterative analysis, generating theories that were grounded in the data (Charmaz, 2006). Emergent themes from initial interviews were used to generate hypotheses that were explored in subsequent interviews. This process enabled a form of iterative member validation, in which participants were invited to reflect on the ongoing analysis of the dataset as a whole and their own individual story. Interview data were initially open-coded (Saldana, 2010) for meaningful content, with codes organised into thematic categories. These categories were interrogated to expose relationships between them, and these relationships were interpreted to generate an overarching set of core themes and develop explanatory theories. Constant comparison and deviant case analysis (Silverman, 2005) were employed throughout.¹

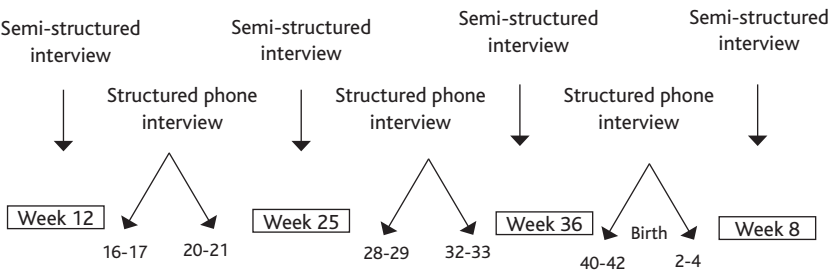
Data presented in this article were all drawn from two sets of interviews with each participant, one face-to-face and one telephone interview, in the first eight weeks after birth.

Findings

Overall, a major concern for participants in the first two months of fatherhood was finding an appropriate level of work for themselves in relation to both their own and their partner's needs. All participants bar two (James and Peter) planned to be primary breadwinners, while their partners would be primary carers. All were very aware of the normative discourse of contemporary fatherhood, and were keen to be involved fathers, both physically present and emotionally engaged. They were also concerned that they made a 'fair' contribution, and did not leave their partners overburdened. The data presented below outline three different narratives of 'fairness' that were identified in the accounts provided by participants, and these specific data have been selected for presentation in order to challenge and interrogate ideas about morally progressive fatherhood.

Before the data are presented, it is important to note that all the fathers in this study were first-time fathers, up to eight weeks after the birth of their first child. As such, the data below represent their attempts to find 'fairness' in the very early stages of fatherhood.

Figure 1: Placement of interviews



Fairness as reciprocity

Fairness as reciprocity identified the mother as the primary carer and the father the primary breadwinner. However, these roles were not fixed or exclusive, and practising fairness as reciprocity involved fathers recognising the demands placed on their partners and trying to lessen the burden where possible. Michael, for example, described wanting to do as much as he could, but felt that, given his breadwinning role, he could not stay up for night feeds. He tried to make things 'fair' by reciprocating his wife's work at weekends and taking over the night feeds:

'I still wanted to do as much as I possibly could ... but clearly if I'm doing all the night feeds in the week and then going to work, I'd probably be asleep for the whole weekend. So it just doesn't work. Whereas on the weekend at least I'm there, more relaxed, not having to get up at six o'clock in the morning, erm and can obviously give my partner a break from doing the

night feeds and what have you. But I try in the week, when I'm home, to do a couple of feeds, to give my partner a break because she's had her all day.... I think you soon realise actually you can't physically do all of that and you need to share out tasks and that's probably what actually takes the time to get used to....' (Michael)

Charles had a similar, but less formalised, arrangement. He reflected on the fact that he was getting more sleep than his wife – a result of his wife breastfeeding and him not waking up when she did – and reported feeling like he was “letting her down”. He described an attempt to reciprocate her efforts at night by giving her time to sleep during the day. This was something he was able to do because he was self-employed and worked from home:

'I get a lot more sleep than she does. Not that I'm complaining, no but it kind of makes me feel like I'm letting her down a bit, which is kind of why, I think, during the day, if I can let her have, you know, a couple of hours snooze or something, then she should.' (Charles)

Janesh was very explicit about trying to make things as fair as possible for both himself and his wife. He described their weekday routine, with him working during the day and returning home to take over childcare while his wife had a rest. His wife then took over for the 'night shift' so that Janesh could get enough sleep to work the next day. He reflected, however, that this arrangement was not perfect, and felt that he did not get any time to relax. He was either working, looking after his daughter or sleeping, and reflected that he did not get any downtime. He also believed that his daughter was at her most fractious in the early evening, and he consequently spent that time trying to calm her rather than enjoying her:

'[W]hen I'm working during the week, basically, we decided that I'll sleep at night time, or try and sleep and I won't get up for the night shift ... but after work I'll come home and I'll look after her until about 11.30 when she goes into bed and then [wife] will have a little bit of a rest, a bit of her own time, and then she'll do the night shift. ... so we're trying to make it as fair as possible for each other, but it still feels like a full-time job for both of us, because I think when you're at work all day, when you come in ... you don't really have a moment to relax, and then coming home and then literally chucking whatever down your throat and just eat because [you're] looking after her and I think sometimes she can be the most difficult between ... before going to bed properly, so you've got almost, you know, just trying to calm her down.' (Janesh)

Janesh highlights a potential difficulty of a reciprocal approach to fairness. There is nothing straightforward about reciprocity in this context, and the extent to which some work is a reciprocation of other work is highly subjective and might vary with time, place, competence and expectation. The period in which Janesh tried to reciprocate, he felt, was a particularly difficult time in which his daughter was fractious, and it was not obviously 'fair' that his wife rested at the time when their daughter was at her most difficult – especially given that as a non-primary carer Janesh may have

been less experienced and less able to handle the difficulty. On the other hand, it was not obviously 'unfair' either. That time in the early evening was the only period when Janesh *could* do that work and when his wife could rest. Arguably, those four to five difficult hours might just about have reciprocated the 19 to 20 hours of solid childcare his wife undertook on a daily basis. It is difficult to identify any objective measure of fairness here, and the extent to which the relative 'difficulty' of childcare work undertaken at different times of the day is measurable is highly uncertain. The difficulty in finding an objective measure, and balance, speaks to the necessity of the kind of discussion and communication that Michael described. He characterised it as a negotiation; trial and error, with both he and his wife taking a reflexive attitude towards their parenting arrangements and working out what worked for them and what did not:

'I think after the first week that I'd been back [at work] we sort of thought actually, what can we do better next week? And then at the end of that week, we said right okay, where did we maybe go wrong and what could we do better the following week, so that it just makes it easier for all of us. Because at the end of the day you want to be there and support both of them anyway, as much as you can. And that's the difficulty, you want to do as much as you can but have to actually realise that if you're going to work and then do everything that you wanted to do, you soon run out of ... steam.' (Michael)

Fairness as equality

Another approach to fairness, used by a few participants, is the 'equality' model, involving either splitting time equally or trying to share all tasks. James described one approach when he talked about an attempt to get some sleep by going to the spare room. James's wife made the suggestion, but he said he could not do it. Having permission was not enough to make it seem fair to him, and he still ended up trying to help his wife to have the same amount of sleep that he had. He described it as 'sharing the pain':

"It's like go out to the spare room and, you know, get some rest, you know, it's no- I'm gonna be up, you know, I've had a few hours' sleep already, like you haven't, you've been awake so, you know, let's swap, let's share the pain" (James).

Brian described a different approach, which involved doing everything together. He talked about how he and his wife had considered taking turns, but decided it would not be feasible because his wife would not be able to sleep regardless of whose turn it was. That arrangement would not, in Brian's eyes, be fair, because even though he would have one night on and one night off, his wife would have no nights off. Consequently, he described trying to do everything together:

'[W]e both get up, because ... you know, one of the things that you've probably gathered with us is that we've done everything together throughout this. This has been our journey and erm we continue to do that. I think somebody said "You should take it in turns," you know, and I must admit

that does appeal to a degree, you know, that [wife] will get up one night, I'll get up the next night, but then if I get up and [wife]'s in bed, she won't sleep because I know she won't because she'll be listening and going "Is everything all right?". And whereas me, I'd probably just go back to sleep, but I know that [wife] won't sleep if we agreed to that. She'd be up because she's, erm ... I don't know whether it's maternal instinct, or what, but I think she would still be up and "Is anything wrong?" So we're doing it together.' (Brian)

An equality model of fairness has certain attractions, and the notion of 'sharing the pain' may be appealing because it focuses on parenting as a shared experience, where the trials and tribulations of an undoubtedly tough period are experienced together. However, overall, it may not be the most efficacious use of time and resources, and sharing the childcare role equally only contributes to 'overall' fairness if it is accompanied by an equal sharing of other domestic and economic labour.

Fairness as functional specialisation

An alternative model of fairness could be described as 'functional specialisation'. This term covers a range of approaches that are all based on specialising in specific tasks and roles. Ben, for example, talked about how he and his partner had discovered that they were good at different things, and so tried to split labour along those lines. Ben did the majority of the winding, while his partner was better at changing nappies. This may be considered fair because it meant that neither of them was struggling to do tasks that they were uncomfortable with or found difficult. Ben and his partner had tried to work out a system of taking turns at night, but found that it did not work because too often the 'on-duty parent' did not wake up. The ad-hoc system they developed, working on the basis of whoever gets up first, deals with the baby, seemed to work for Ben, who noted that while he did occasionally get an 'elbow in the back' it 'tends to level out':

Ben: 'It's kind of just trial and error really. It's like we've found out I'm a little bit better at getting the wind up, and [partner]'s a lot better at like the whole changing and stuff like that, so normally I'll feed her and wind her, and [partner] will get her changed, and I think it depends who's more awake at that one point as well, when it comes to the night. Because obviously she's with her all day, so I do like to try and give her a bit of a break when I get back from work. But when it's a three o'clock in the morning, it's hard to drag yourself out of bed sometimes. So it's just whoever gets to her first normally. We try – we did try and work out like a little system but it didn't work so....'

Author: 'What was that system?'

Ben: 'We said we'd take it in turns, if she got up, I'll go first then [partner], then ... but it just doesn't work like that because sometimes you do sleep through it, it's not often, but now and again. So you get a bit

of an angry elbow in the back. Get up. But it kind of levels itself out if I'm honest.'

An alternative approach to functional specialisation was taken by Phil, who had difficulty with the reciprocal model he was trying to establish. He was becoming too tired to function at work, and the tipping point came when he was driving on a regular commute and found himself shaking. People at work started to comment on how terrible he looked, and he decided he could not go on trying to do so much. He recalled a conversation he had with someone at work who gave him some advice:

'I think it was a comment that the guys said at work, he said at the end of the day, you're there to support your wife, and your wife is there to support your child, and erm – and you know that is the case because I have to go to work and I have to earn the money in order to – for, you know, for us to continue. So I think that was a good, simple way of looking at it.' (Phil)

This way of looking at it enabled Phil to focus on what he saw as his primary role – breadwinning – and to take steps to ensure that he could function adequately in it. This led, he said, to some unfamiliar tension in his relationship, until he and his wife had an open discussion about it:

'It wasn't that we'd fall out with each other but it was sort of strained. I mean, I've explained how our relationship is really solid and we don't sort of ever argue but – we never sort of argued but it wasn't the norm, and it was slightly more strained between us ... especially when we first got into the new routine, and basically I was saying, "Look, I'll do his last feed, and then I'll sleep and then I'll go to work, I'm up and out." I get up at six and so I was sort of getting back to that and I think she was waking up thinking, "oh", especially when we had difficulties with him, he basically wasn't sleeping through the night, and she would sort of look at me and say, you know, "Why do you get to sleep?", you know, but having that chat, I think that makes it better, and just saying, "Look, we're trying to please each other" but I was struggling at work, and I explained that to her, and she was sort of, erm, she was used to this like, "I'm going to sleep all night".... Trying to get in the right mindsets to think, "If I don't sleep all night, it doesn't matter because I'm not going to work tomorrow", you know, erm I can't sleep in the day and I think it was getting that frame of mind and I think that conversation helped, so we're back to normal now.' (Phil)

When Phil was asked how easy it was to initiate that conversation, he described how he needed to reconcile it with himself first before raising it with his wife, and how he was worried about being selfish:

'I'll have a mental game in my own head, sort of thinking, yeah, you are going to work, but you know, you can't not help, because [wife] needs her sleep as well. She needs to relax. So I think it was getting it into sort of an order where erm it seemed fair for me to sort of talk to her about it. So, no, it wasn't overly hard, and it was – I think we both came to ... the same point together because [wife] said I think I've been trying to pull in too many

ways, and I was sort of saying, "Well yeah, I need to sleep and I think if we do it this way I'll do the last feed, and then", you know, so it wasn't that hard but it was – it was just a bit slightly awkward to try and – wondering how to put it across in a way that you don't seem like I'm trying to get out of it, kind of thing. I think that was the hard bit, was my personal feeling of "am I sounding like I'm going to be a bit of, you know, a bit of a, well, being a bit selfish", yeah, that's the word.' (Phil)

An alternative approach was taken by Peter, who was retired and became a stay-at-home father while his wife went out to work. Peter explained that because his wife had to work he did not want her sleep pattern disturbed, and so he did all the night shifts. He described how he undertook all the domestic labour so that his wife could spend time with their son when she was at home:

'Things like the night feed, I agreed that I would do it because I didn't want [wife] to change her sleep pattern or anything and get disturbed and have a poor night's sleep. Obviously when I get up to feed him it does disturb her but to a lesser degree. As I say, I'm up for about an hour by the time I've fed him, changed him and got back to bed and perhaps managing to get to sleep but not always.... Um, so the night shifts, I volunteered to do and um, like yesterday, when [wife] came back from work we prepared tea together and she bathed him because she wanted involvement, but even though she was bathing him, I still went up and changed the bin and that and passed her this, that and the other. So I was still involved but not actually the bathing of him, 'cause she wants to be involved. But when she's at home, she wants to have as much involvement with him as she can. So domestic things, as far as I'm concerned, err, just from [wife], don't matter, because I'll take care of those, let her enjoy him when she's at home 'cause the rest of the time, she's either sleeping or she's at work.' (Peter)

This arrangement seemed initially, to me, very progressive, as a complete rejection of traditionally gendered parenting roles. On a closer look, however, I found it difficult to see precisely why it was progressive, given that it seemed to replicate, almost exactly, a strongly gendered, and arguably regressive, form of parenting, based on a separate primary carer and breadwinner, of the kind advocated by the 1950s' parenting 'expert' Donald Winnicott (1957). It is the father who stays at home, does all the housework and primary childcare, and facilitates his wife's relationship with her child. Peter's wife, in this case, appeared to be taking on the distant breadwinner role, with the relationship with her child mediated and facilitated by Peter, who ensured that she did not have to worry about domestic labour and had the opportunity to bond with her child. If Janesh, above, had described his wife doing all the domestic labour and childcare and facilitating access to his child, this would seem regressive in the extreme. Peter's arrangement, and our response to it, should therefore give significant pause for thought.²

Discussion

The data presented above challenged me, and I hope will also challenge the reader, to think critically about what it is we find progressive and morally laudable about the recent shifts in fathering culture, and what ‘progress’ in contemporary fatherhood really is. Current discourse tends to focus on role fulfilment (ie, practice):

- Does the father spend enough quality time with his children?
- Does he prioritise work or family?
- Does he demonstrate affection?
- Does he share equally in household labour?

The problem with this framing, however, is that it produces a moral imperative to achieve an idealised fatherhood that can give the impression of an individual father ‘failing’ if he cannot fulfil all these roles (Dermott, 2008; Genesoni and Tallandini, 2009; Draper and Ives, 2013). Different ways of conceptualising fatherhood try to reframe it to mitigate the risk of men failing as fathers because they are unable to live up to an expert-mandated ideal. Dermott’s (2008: 143) intimate fatherhood, for example, tries to move ‘beyond narrow formulations of fathers, either as failing to contribute to, or as sidelined from, family life’. ‘Intimacy’ might legitimise, through economic necessity, physical absence, which is compensated for by investing heavily in an emotional relationship with the child. Similarly, Williams’s ‘reflexive father’ will pay less attention to normative ideals of fatherhood, and develops his individual practices around his personal biography and circumstances. In Williams’s (2008: 501) own words:

[H]ow they behave as fathers is dependent on their own family circumstances, by what they are compelled to do by situational circumstances. Though many of the men talk about wanting to be different to their own fathers in terms of many key aspects of their relationships with partners and children, they acknowledge that they also have to be different if they are to maintain a relationship with their partners. Changes in domestic arrangements are not without conflict, but the men recognize the problems of a failure to adapt as well as the benefits of adapting.

These accounts are, arguably, morally preferable because, rather than imposing a set of prescriptive norms that may not always be possible to adhere to, they appreciate the complexity of adhering to those norms in the context of modern family life, allowing individuals to respond flexibly to the various competing demands placed on them in differently legitimate ways (see also Ives, 2014). Rather than specifying that a father must do X, Y and Z regardless of context, they approach the moral complexity of fatherhood from the point of view of a pragmatic and naturalistic ethics, which rejects the idea that we can draw on externally derived foundational principles to assess the rights and wrongs of a father’s practice. Rather, we have to look at the details of the practice, and examine the context in which the practice takes place, and in doing so we can learn about what good fatherhood is for that father, given the circumstances in which he is operating.³

The data presented above show various ways in which men can adopt a critical stance towards the ideal of the ‘new’ father, and try to negotiate a path through the

moral maze of fatherhood, acutely aware of the ethically normative dimensions of their practice. They reveal different strategies for thinking carefully about what their role is, what it ought to be, and how to achieve a working balance that is practically achievable and ethically acceptable in the context of their relationships and broader discourses of 'good' fatherhood and masculinities. In doing so, we can see these participants developing compromises that reflect their personal circumstances, but are reconcilable (in theory) with broader moral commitments to fairness and equality. The moral concept at work in the findings above – 'fairness' – is highly subjective and context dependent, and supervenes on facts such as expectations, relationship norms, appetite for certain kinds of work, capacity and competence. Therefore, what is fair in the context of one couple will not be fair in another, and what is considered 'fair' overall may not be what is 'equal'.⁴ Imperfect and messy though these solutions undoubtedly are, and however open to criticism they may be, they represent a striving to 'do fatherhood well', characterised by an awareness of relevant moral discourses and a conscious deliberation of the choices available to them and the moral demands placed on them. This, then, presents us with the concept of the 'deliberative father'.

The broad idea that some kind of reflective practice defines good parenthood is not without its critics. Claims that reflexivity is morally praiseworthy in and of itself may be challenged by general criticisms that it constitutes self-indulgent naval gazing (which, arguably, can be dealt with by performing it conscientiously; see Ives and Dunn, 2010), or more specific and salient criticism, such as that laid down by Reece (2013). Reece argues that constructing the 'good' parent as the 'self-reflective' parent is deeply problematic. She appeals to the problem of infinite regress, arguing that because the process of reflection, introspection and self-discovery is ongoing and potentially never ending, those processes can never provide adequate justification for parenting decisions. Even after substantial reflection:

parenting decision[s] will still be suspect, because [parents] can never claim to have reflected sufficiently to have achieved clear self-knowledge. This means that, just like substantive positive parenting, reflection is a life-long process, never fully achieved. The consequence is that, after reflection just as much as before reflection, [the parent] faces an impossible struggle to know what he really wants to decide. (Reece, 2013: 52)

Reece's concern that the difficulty in determining how much reflection is enough leads to the worry that mere reflection is not enough to overcome culturally embedded 'expert discourse in the absence of a measuring rod for reflection' (Reece, 2013: 52). Reece is concerned that reflection merely defers the difficult decision to the point of when to stop reflecting and act. Even after reflection, this decision, argues Reece (2013: 52), 'leads us straight back into the arms of a substantively correct approach to parenting, which will inevitably be laid down by experts and officials'.

This critique, however, is limited, and need not apply to the 'deliberative father'. First, it deals with a narrow conception of reflection and reflexivity, limited to introspection and self-analysis. The 'deliberative' process tentatively outlined above is much more than this. Deliberation, in the sense being talked about here, involves a wide-ranging analysis of what one ought to do, involving thoughtful consideration of what one is *prima facie* obliged to do, what one is *prima facie* entitled to, one's own needs and the needs of others. It seeks to justify one's action and choices, and

to do so in a way that can be subject to external criticism; and that requires external discussion and negotiation. This is quite different from the introspection, reflection and self-discovery characterised by Reece and those she is criticising (eg, Stadlen, 2004; Ramaekers and Suissa, 2012).

Second, the critique relies on this narrow conception to argue that it can never truly result in divergence from the substantively correct approach laid out by experts. The assumption that the problem of infinite regress means there is no end point, meaning that exiting from reflection will always be defined by experts, assumes, wrongly, that people are not capable of independent thought resulting in action that challenges expert opinion. It speaks to the assumed (but certainly not inconsequential) power differential between the 'lay person' and the 'expert', and the antecedent power of normative discourses that direct us to act in certain ways in order to 'comply' and avoid deviance. The idea that people will always end up doing what the experts say assumes, however, that individuals are always powerless to challenge these norms, will either perform deliberation badly (in which case they are not sufficiently deliberative) or are simply incapable of it. The middle claim can be accepted without a problem. Not everyone will be able or willing to deliberate conscientiously, and this does not speak against deliberative fatherhood in itself. The first and last claims, however, are simply untrue, as evidenced by the data from this study (presented above and in Ives, 2014), which suggest that some men are capable of deliberation that results in them taking what experts might describe as an intransigent line towards fathering and parenting relationships. Furthermore, the fact that deliberation may end up in agreement with the 'experts' is not a problem. It is quite possible that, after undergoing a process of deliberation, one might well decide on a course of action that is supported by 'experts'. The morally relevant difference is that the expert-sanctioned action is not performed *because* it is sanctioned by 'experts', but because the parent has decided that, on this occasion, they agree with the expert line.

A third criticism, which is perhaps the most salient, is that if we define good fatherhood in terms of process, then simply undergoing the right process would make any decision the correct one. This slide into process-driven relativism is not necessary. The outcome of any process of deliberation can always be criticised, and the deliberative father should always take on board and deliberate on that criticism. The way to think about moral progress, here, which I outline in depth elsewhere (Ives, 2013), is as a constant striving for improvement, on the understanding that any solution we find to a moral problem will be imperfect, fallible and most likely temporary, because circumstances always change. There is never any clear point at which to stop deliberating, and no fixed reference point, but practical necessity means we have to stop thinking and act at some point, and that is what necessitates compromise. Conscientiously engaging in the process of deliberation with the goal of being a morally good father (and partner, and man), accepting that there will be reasonable disagreement about what achieving this goal involves, and being aware that achieving that goal requires negotiation and compromise, admits the possibility that he could get it 'right'. It does not guarantee that he has. When we do not know precisely where the goal is, or what shape it is, the best we can do is ensure that we are running towards where we think it is, on the understanding that we might have to change direction. It is only by deliberating that we can ever become aware of the need to change direction. We do not have a clear and universal idea of what morally

optimal fatherhood looks like, and until we do, a good father can only be someone who is actively trying to find out.

The fact that this deliberation, and resultant compromise, may lead to practices that could be criticised for being ethically and practically sub-optimal, by anyone, misses the point entirely. The realities of fatherhood and family life mean that compromises have to be made, because parenthood is replete with dilemmatic tensions that have to be resolved (see also Ives, 2014). There are reasons why we might be critical of some of the practices described by participants in this article, not least because an alternative explanation for what they are doing is that they are engaging in post-hoc justification for the roles they have chosen, attempting to 'shoehorn' their practices into notions of fairness and equality in order to justify them. The empirical question of whether or not participants in this study were engaging in that kind of post-hoc justification, or whether they were being merely aspirational in their search for fairness, is moot. The important, and more interesting, point is that the alternative interpretation, the *deliberative* father, presents us with a potentially new way of theorising morally progressive fatherhood, and gives us a way of explaining why it is morally progressive that goes beyond adherence to idealised norms laid down by experts. It is not progressive because it conforms to ideals of best practice and role fulfilment. Rather, it is progressive because it represents a morally enlightened approach to the process of working out who should do what and why. It recognises fatherhood as a distinctly moral practice, and takes seriously the requirement to consider the wider relational aspects of that practice, and not just those directly related to childcare. It is not morally progressive because the process of deliberation *ensures* morally optimal practice. It is, rather, morally progressive because the process of deliberation makes morally optimal practice *possible*.

Notes

¹ A more detailed exposition of the analytic process can be found in Ives (2014).

² Peter's case, however, is not strictly analogous to the stay-at-home mother norm. Having retired from his job, Peter is not giving up a possible career to be a stay-at-home father. This is in contrast to many stay-at-home mothers, who may have career prospects damaged by taking time out.

³ For more details about this kind of account of ethics, see Racine (2008), Frith (2010) and Ives (2013).

⁴ Given that what is 'equal' is not always what is fair. Fairness incorporates notions of justice, and justice may require that equal things are treated equally and unequal things treated unequally. What is fair, therefore, may not be what is equal.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant number RES-000-22-3964). I would like to thank all the members of the Oxford Fatherhood Network for their critical and constructive feedback on early drafts, in particular Esther Dermott and Tina Miller, and the two anonymous reviewers. Finally, thank you to the men who volunteered their time to take part, and thereby made this article possible.

References

Charmaz, K, 2006, *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand oaks, CA: Sage Publications

- Collier, R, 2010, *Men, law and gender: Essays on the 'man' of law*, Abingdon: Routledge
- Dermott, E, 2008, *Intimate fatherhood: A sociological analysis*, Abingdon: Routledge
- Dermott, H, Miller, T, forthcoming, More than the sum of its parts: contemporary fatherhood, is anything new? *Families, Relationships and Societies*
- Draper, H, Ives, J, 2013, Men's involvement in antenatal care and labour: Rethinking a medical model, *Midwifery*, 29, 7, 723–29
- Frith, L, 2010, Symbiotic bioethics: a practical methodology, *Bioethics*, 26, 4, 198–206
- Furstenberg, FF, 1988, Good dads – bad dads: two faces of fatherhood, in J. Cherlin (ed) *The changing American family and public policy*, Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 193–218
- Genesoni, L, Tallandini, M, 2009, Men's psychological transition to fatherhood: an analysis of the literature, 1989–2008, *Birth*, 36, 4, 305–18
- Ives, J, 2013, A method of reflexive balancing in a pragmatic, interdisciplinary and reflexive bioethics, *Bioethics*, 28, 6, 302–12
- Ives, J, 2014, Men, maternity and moral residue: negotiating the moral demands of the transition to first time fatherhood, *Sociology of Health and Illness*, first published online, doi: 10.1111/1467-9566.12138.
- Ives, J, Dunn, M, 2010, Who's arguing? A call for reflexivity in bioethics, *Bioethics*, 24, 5, 256–65
- Racine, E, 2008, Which naturalism for bioethics: a defence of moderate (pragmatic) naturalism, *Bioethics*, 22, 2, 92–100
- Ramaekers, S, Suissa, J, 2012, *The claims of parenting: Reasons, responsibility and society*, Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer
- Reece H, 2013, The pitfalls of positive parenting, *Ethics and Education*, 8, 1, 42–54
- Saldana, J, 2010, *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- Silverman, D, 2005, *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analysing talk, text and interaction*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- Stadlen, N, 2004, *What mothers do: Especially when it looks like nothing*, London: Judy Piatkus
- Williams, S, 2008, What is fatherhood? Searching for the reflexive father, *Sociology*, 42, 3, 487–502
- Winnicott, D, 1957, What about father?, in J. Hardenberg (ed) *The child and the family: First relationships*, Tavistock Publications, 81–6